U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Turkey

Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - 2008
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Part 1

Turkey is a constitutional republic with a multiparty parliamentary system and a president with limited powers, elected by direct election following an October 2007 referendum. Seven parties are represented in parliament after the July 22 parliamentary elections, which were generally considered free and fair. The government generally respects the human rights of its citizens; however, serious problems remain in the areas of torture, unlawful killings, and abuse by security forces. Prison conditions remain poor. There are some attempts by military, politicians, and others to influence the judiciary, and the overly close relationship of judges and prosecutors continues to hinder the right to a fair trial. Excessively long trials are a problem. The government limits freedom of expression through the use of constitutional restrictions and numerous laws, and courts on several occasions ordered telecommunications providers to block access to Web sites. Non-Muslim religious groups continued to face restrictions on practicing their religion openly, owning property, and training leaders. Violence against women, including honor killings and rape, remains a widespread problem, along with child marriage. Trafficking of women and children is also a problem.

Part 2

Turkey must continue to make progress on democratic and rule-of-law reforms. Through dialogue with domestic human rights NGOs, human rights activists, civil society, and the EU, the U.S. government has developed priorities for promoting democratic principles, practices, values, and human rights in the country. Our primary goals are to support legal reforms, including a revised constitution, that lead to more democratic, transparent, and accountable government institutions; build respect for individual rights, civil society, and ethnic diversity; curb the military's influence on nonsecurity issues; and ensure a fair and objective judiciary. We encourage the government to reduce restrictions on non-Turkish language broadcasting; expand freedom of expression for those who express minority viewpoints or address controversial topics such as the 1915 massacres; protect freedom of religion and allow the free functioning of non-Muslim religious institutions, such as the Greek Orthodox Halki Seminary; and take concrete steps to address Kurdish concerns.

Part 3

To promote human rights and democratic values, U.S. officials meet routinely with representatives of the country's political, religious, social, cultural, and ethnic groups to discuss human rights conditions and development of relations between these groups and the government. U.S. officials also meet regularly with members of the legislative and executive branches as well as with the judiciary to encourage continued broad reforms, such as increased protection for free speech, respect for the rights of non-Muslim religions, tolerance for minorities, and increased training to help develop an objective judiciary.

Public diplomacy showcasing American values is essential to promoting liberal values that can underscore needed legal reforms in Turkey. Public diplomacy efforts form a core part of the U.S. strategy to advance freedom and democracy, and to protect the universal rights of freedom of expression and religion. These activities include U.S. speaker programs, exchanges, and disseminating accurate information through public speaking by embassy personnel, visiting U.S. officials, and the mission's Information Resource Center. The United States funds International Visitors Leadership Program exchange on topics including civic education, grassroots activism, and managing diversity. To help promote the rule of law and develop a modern, impartial judiciary, the embassy has included numerous national legislators, local political leaders, judges, justice officials, journalists, academics, and NGO officials in these programs. During 2007, 37 Turks traveled to the United States for extended periods on U.S. programs, met their American counterparts, became more familiar with the structure and functions of U.S. political, judicial, and social systems, and observed U.S. human rights and democracy promotion efforts. Embassy officers travel throughout the country to discuss issues, hear new viewpoints, and seek partners beyond the large urban areas. Officers participate in conferences, seminars, and programs to explain U.S. policies and American values and highlight Turkish-American shared interests. Where appropriate, embassy officers join with EU colleagues to deliver a unified call for increased freedom of expression and religion and greater tolerance for diversity.

The U.S. mission believes a vibrant free press that demonstrates objectivity and high professional standards is critical to helping cultivate more democratic, transparent, and accountable government institutions that respect the viewpoints of civil society, minorities, and non-Muslim religions. To promote press freedom and responsibility, journalists from all forms of media participated in visitor programs focused on journalism, the U.S. political system, and U.S. foreign policy and human rights issues. Projects for the year also included speakers and programs on freedom of expression, the foreign policy formulation process in a democratic society, constitutional law, and information literacy.

Part 4

To promote further the growth of civil society and an understanding of its role, the United States sponsors visitor programs related to religion and the community, citizen participation in a democracy, managing diversity in a multiethnic society, and promoting tolerance through the arts. Visitor programs for civil society and religious leaders also played an important role in promoting the value of stable, reliable political processes. Subjects included U.S. legislative, judicial, and social systems, and the rule of law in the United States. A summer student leader exchange program complemented these projects by introducing the next generation of local leaders to these same U.S. institutions and processes. A Fulbright interfaith dialogue project, and speaker programs on religion and modernity, also opened new avenues for dialogue with local counterparts.

To expand efforts to promote legal reforms in the country, the U.S. Department of Justice hosted a conference on the UN Convention Against Corruption, which Turkey has signed and ratified. The United States supported a citizens exchange program to support a Ministry of Justice project to improve the efficiency of the judicial process through the use of alternatives to trial in certain cases. The project also included an exchange between U.S. experts and Ministry of Justice and Interior officials on police oversight issues.

Finally, helping the country meet the requirements for the elimination of trafficking in persons continued to be a priority. U.S. officials remained in close contact with the lead agencies, international organizations, and NGOs engaged in antitrafficking efforts. A joint Turkey-Republic of Georgia visitor program brought together a judge, a police official, and two nongovernmental shelter administrators for a three-week exploration of U.S. approaches and efforts to combat human trafficking.

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